

Drum Major Instinct – Mark 10:35-45 – October 21, 2018

Rev. Rachel A. Wann

We are back in Mark's gospel and the scene here is Jesus traveling to Jerusalem with his disciples. While on the road they've been conversing, and Jesus had been telling him about his upcoming death. He told them he would be betrayed and turned over to the religious leaders, who would hand him over to the gentiles to be flogged and killed. Then he told them, after three days, he would rise again.

Then in the very next passage, today's lesson, James and John came forward with a request. It's like they weren't even paying attention to what he had just said – like they were sitting in the back of the classroom, texting messages to one another and didn't hear a word of the conversation. Because all of a sudden, they came forward with a request that seemed totally out of the blue. And they're sly about it. Now Jesus, they begin. We want to ask you something. But first, you have to promise us you'll say yes. It's game of manipulation, but Jesus won't fall for it. He asked what they wanted. Tell me first, what you want, and then I'll decide how to answer. So the brothers blurted out, we want to sit at your right and left hands when you come in your glory.

After supposedly listening to Jesus talking about his death, not once, but three times by now. And being instructed by Jesus in how a disciple should live - by dying to self, by coming to God as a little child, by putting others first. Yet somehow in all that teaching, all James and John could hear was glory. Let us sit at your sides in your glory. Let us share in that with you.

Jesus responded to them by pointing out that they don't have a clue what they are talking about. They missed what it means to be a disciple, a follower of Jesus Christ. They got everything backwards, still living in a worldly mindset.

Hearing this interchange, between Jesus, James and John, the other disciples cried out in indignation. They got angry with the two brothers. But sadly, they got angry for the wrong reasons. We might hope they would wonder, how dare you ask Jesus to sit in a place of honor with him when he comes into his glory. You should know better. Haven't you been paying attention? Haven't you learned anything from what he has been teaching us all this time? Haven't you watched how he treats others?

No, the other disciples were mad, because they themselves wanted those positions of honor. They too had thought in their own minds about what it might be like in the future. When Jesus claimed his messianic throne. When Jesus rose up and led the people in rebellion over the Romans who occupied their lands. The other disciples were just as obtuse. They wanted a

Messiah of power and force, and they wanted to be the generals in his army, to sit in a place of power and glory when he came into his kingdom.

The words betrayal, condemnation, death went in one ear and out the other. Think of it this way – when you don't understand something, your mind tends to pass over it. Suppose someone starts talking in technical jargon, using words and concepts that simply are not familiar to you. You struggle to make sense of it, but after a while, you give up trying to understand.

For example, I know a little bit of Spanish. Enough to sort of get by. But if I listen to a conversation in Spanish, I may catch only one or two words in each sentence. After a while it becomes difficult to pay attention, and soon I just give up, because I don't have a clue as to what is being said. And maybe for the disciples, every time Jesus started talking the "death talk" they tuned it out. They reverted to their own understanding about what they THOUGHT the Messiah should be, not how Jesus actually was. And we do the same thing when we read scripture. We hear what we want to hear and tune out the rest, going back to what is familiar to us.

The one thing the disciples did understand was the word glory. Jesus had mentioned that word in a previous conversation, and they latched onto it. Wanting to participate in it with Jesus when the time came.

Years ago I read a sermon that was preached by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. back in February of 1968. Dr. King identified the main issue in the text as demonstrated by James and John as being an example of the Drum Major Instinct. He said, this drum major instinct is that part of our personality, part of our ego, that wants to be out in front. We want to lead the parade. We want to be in the limelight. We want all eyes focused on us. We love being the center of attention in our own little worlds. <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/drum-major-instinct-sermon-delivered-ebenezer-baptist-church> (His sermon was actually an adaption of a sermon by J. Wallace Hamilton, "Drum Major Instincts" from *Ride the Wild Horses*, 1952 - <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/drum-major-instinct>)

In his sermon, Dr. King referred to the psychoanalyst Alfred Adler, who hypothesized that this drum major instinct is the dominant impulse of humanity. He contradicted his contemporary Freud and Freud's assumption that sex was the human's dominant impulse. King preached, "Adler came with a new argument saying that this quest for recognition, this desire for attention, this desire for distinction is the basic impulse, the basic drive of human life, this drum major instinct."

We want to be praised for our achievements. We want to be acknowledged for our accomplishments. We may feel a touch of envy when someone else gets the limelight, and we

find ourselves living in the shadow of their success. We desire to be known. Deep down in our heart of hearts, we want our piece of the glory, just like James and John.

Jesus recognized that and he named it for what it is. When the other disciples come crowding forward for their little piece of that glory pie, their place in the spotlight, Jesus gave them another teaching on what it means to be a disciple. "You all know the earthly rulers like their status and power. They enjoy lording it over others, flaunting their greatness and walking all over those who are under them. Telling anyone who will listen how great they are. But life as my follower is different than that. To be great in my kingdom you must first become a servant. Whoever wants to be in first place, must step to the back of the line. Why? Because I didn't come to be served by others. I came to serve others."

Now when I first saw Dr. King's sermon title, Drum Major Instinct, I was intrigued. I am rather partial to drum majors having been one myself back in high school and also in college. But as I got into the sermon, I had to take issue with the comparison. Now I totally understand and agree with the premise and Dr. King's characterization of the typical drum major persona. And I can see where this need to be in the limelight, this need to lead the parade, is a strong, negative part of the human condition. And that is the problem demonstrated by James and John in this passage.

But my experience of being a drum major in the marching band had nothing to do with being up front. In fact, what I was taught about being a drum major was a lot more like what Jesus taught than this goal of being first.

I met my mentor Dr. Tim for the first time when I was in high school. He taught, and still teaches, student leaders, giving workshops and motivational talks, and training high school musicians in what it means to be a true leader. To be a leader, one must first be a servant. Sound familiar? Now realize, when I learned all this from Tim, this was long before I became a Christian. I had no idea the root of this teaching came from Jesus. I just thought it was something that Tim read in a book somewhere. Well...I guess he did read it in a book!

Anyway, Tim taught students that if they wanted to be a leader in the band, or in any area of life, they needed to put others first. They needed to be willing to do the dirtiest, most thankless job. They had to be an example for others. If they expected others to be fully committed to the band, then they needed to show that same commitment and more. He said that leaders arrived early and stayed late. Leaders didn't wait for someone else to clean up a mess, they did it themselves, and didn't boast about doing it. And while leaders **did** get to stand in the spotlight during a performance or in a parade, the pride one felt wasn't for oneself, but for the group as a whole.

Leaders didn't take breaks if there was work to be done. Leaders didn't complain about problems but sought ways of fixing the problems. If a band member kept messing up in the show, it was the leader's job to spend extra time with that person to help them learn it. Leaders didn't gossip about others or tolerate malicious talk from others, but stood up for the underdog. The group as a whole was only as strong as the weakest member. Leaders understood that every member was important, no matter how small or insignificant that person might seem. The last chair freshman clarinet player was just as important as the first chair senior trumpet player that had the big solo.

These lessons of leadership that Dr Tim taught had an important impact on my life and how I tried to relate to others. Imagine my shock and pleasant surprise, when, after becoming a Christian, I realized that what I had been taught about the qualities of servant leadership were the same as what Jesus taught about being disciples. Now this isn't to say that it's easy for me, or for anyone else. We all struggle with the desire to put self first. But from Dr. Tim, I learned that being a drum major was so much more than getting to stand in the limelight out in front of the band. It was a lot of hard work.

In the same way, being a disciple of Jesus Christ entails much more than simply adopting the tag "Christian." Jesus had a pretty specific agenda. He didn't hide his reasons for being here. He didn't soften the expectations that he had for his followers. He didn't coddle people or coax them. If someone chose to turn away from him because his message was too hard, he let them go. He didn't coerce people to join him, but he didn't compromise his expectations when someone did choose to follow him.

By accepting the role of being a follower of Christ, we are also accepting the type of life of a servant leader. One who leads by serving others first. James and John and the other disciples, they eventually got the message and were true leaders in the fledgling Christian church. It took a while, but they got it. Eventually this message started to make sense, and they could finally comprehend what Jesus meant.

This same message is given to us. You want to be great? Well, be great in serving others. You want to be first? Be first taking care of the sick and the poor and the hungry. Seek glory not in your own vanity, but in putting the needs of others before your own. When we live in this way, when we put others first and reach out in love and compassion to the least and the lost, we truly will join Jesus in his glory.